

Chapter 2 begins a new section in the gospel (2.1-3.6). Together these five accounts have been called “controversy narratives,” and rightly so. Until now, Jesus’ ministry has been accepted with open arms, with all of the towns coming out to him (1.33) and everyone coming to him from everywhere (1.45). It is beginning with the healing of the paralytic that everything changes. People are still amazed, but now Jewish leaders begin questioning Jesus’ claims to forgive sins (2.1-12), questioning his eating companions (13-17), questioning the lack of fasting in the piety of his disciples (18-22), questioning his Sabbath-keeping habits (23-3.5), and finally, plotting to kill him (3.6). I agree with Marcus, who sees a building tension throughout the section. “The opponents move from questioning Jesus silently (2.7) to interrogating the disciples about him (2.16) to interrogating him about them (2.18, 24) to seeking legal grounds for condemning him (3.2) to plotting his murder (3.6).”¹ In effect, these accounts begin the demise of Jesus.

HEALING AND FORGIVENESS (2.1-12)

And he entered again into Capernaum some time later and it was heard that he was at home. And many gathered together so that there was no longer room at the door, and he was speaking to them the Word. And four men came to him, carrying a paralytic.² And they were unable to bring him to Jesus because of the crowds, so they unroofed the roof where Jesus was and digging out a hole, lowered the paralytic through the roof on the mat he was lying on. And Jesus saw their faith and said to the paralytic, “Child, your sins are forgiven.”

But there were some scribes sitting there and discussing in their hearts, “Why does he speak like that? He blasphemes! Who is able to forgive sins except the One God?” And immediately when Jesus perceiving by his spirit that they were discussing in themselves, he said to them, “What is this that you are discussing in your hearts? Which is easier to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or ‘Rise, take up your bed, and walk’ – so that you may know that the Son of Man has the authority to forgive sins on the earth” – he said to the paralytic, “I say to you, rise, take up your bed, and go away to your home.” And he rose and immediately took up his bed and went out in front of everyone. For this reason everyone was amazed and they glorified God, saying, “We’ve never seen anything like this!”

Jesus and his disciples (assumedly) return from Galilee to Capernaum, probably back to Simon’s house (see notes on 1.21ff). Word soon began to spread that Jesus was back at Simon’s house and so “many” (πολλοι, *polloi*) people pressed in. It should be noted that Mark is consistent in using words like “all,” “many,” “everyone,” and the like to bring attention to the theme of New Exodus. Jesus is doing a new thing that will involve all

¹ Marcus, 214.

² Lit. “And they came carrying to him a paralytic lifted by four.”

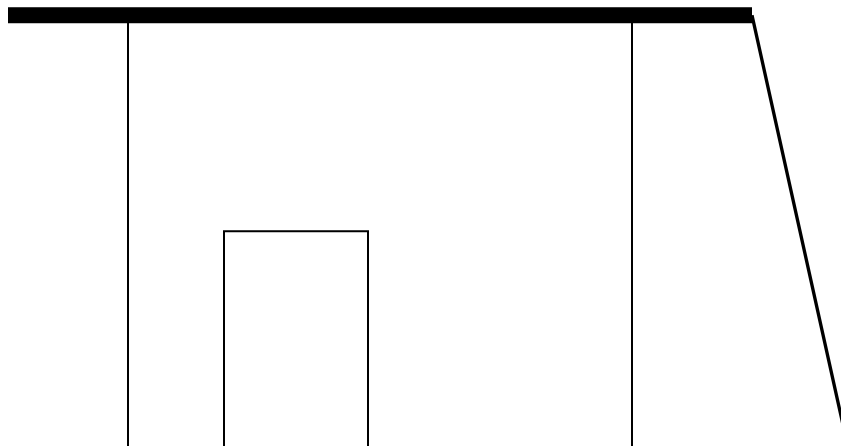
people everywhere. This is emphasized by the phrase, “many gathered together so that there was no longer room at the door.” The crowd that had gathered at Simon’s house was so large that no one else could enter.

Jesus was “speaking the word.” τον λογον (“the Word”) in the NT and early Christianity was a technical term for the Christian message. We can assume from the timing of Jesus’ speaking in Simon’s house that the content of the speech was not the death, burial, and resurrection, as “the Word” would later come to mean (cf. Col 1.5 and Paul’s equivocation of gospel and word); Jesus’ message was concerning the Kingdom of God (1.14-15).

While Jesus is speaking about matters related to the Kingdom, four men bring a friend who is a παραλυτικον, “paralytic.” This word connotes the idea of someone who is unable to walk, a lame person. It seems that the word of Jesus’ healing εξουσια (authority) has reached these men in Capernaum.³ They have come to Simon’s house believing that Jesus is the only one who can help their friend.

Their faith (πιστις) is expressed in the willingness of the four to open the roof. A typical Capernaum house was covered by a flat roof made of tree trunks, clay (or mud), and leaves. It was used many times for a place to hang out with friends and functioned as a cool place to sleep in the summer. This area was usually accessible by an outside staircase or ladder.

TYPICAL CAPERNAUM HOUSE



³ This account may be one of the healings mentioned in 1.32-34.

As you can see from the illustration, it wouldn't take much for a home to be filled with people. Many house-churches during the times of the NT housed no more than 30 people and these were homes of the wealthy. If we assume that around 30 people are inside the home and take as accurate the above description of the roofing materials, we could imagine that the "unroofing" was quite an event! It would take ruining Simon's roof to get to the one person who could heal the men's friend. But this is how Jesus "sees" (ιδων) their faith. This is a key point to emphasize Mark's view of faith and discipleship. Faith is risky and an act of desperation; true disciples will do anything to follow after Jesus (cf. the disciples' abandonment of their careers and families in 1.16-20).⁴

After the friends dig a hole in the roof and Jesus sees the faith of the four, Jesus pronounces something unexpected. In keeping with the previous healing stories in Mark's gospel we would assume that Jesus would heal the man and let him on his way, maybe even giving him a command of silence similar to the one he gave the leper (1.44). Instead Jesus addresses the lame man as "Child." "τεκνον is not a common form of address...The unexpected degree of familiarity it implies is no doubt designed to provide assurance."⁵ This is a much different response than Jesus' response to the leper in the previous pericope ("Jesus was indignant," 1.41).

The next phrase begins the theme of controversy: "Child, your sins are forgiven." It is no surprise that modern readers of Mark's gospel are surprised by this response from Jesus. One explanation of Jesus' response is that in Jewish thought sickness and sin, as well as healing and forgiveness, were closely related.

In many OT texts healing and forgiveness of sin and physical healing were so closely related that it is hard to tell whether the language of healing is meant to be understood of physical illness or metaphorically for restored spiritual health (e.g., Pss. 41.4; 103.3; Is 53.4-6), but sometimes physical healing is clearly related to forgiveness of sin (2 Ch. 7.13-14; Is 38.16-17) just as physical suffering can be attributed to the sin of the sufferer (Nu 12.9-15; 2 Ch 26.16-21) or indeed to sin in the community. That suffering is the result of sin in the general sense that the world's evils are traced to the Fall would have been generally agreed, but the Book of Job testifies to a strong reaction against the view that the suffering of an individual must necessarily be the result of his or her own sin. A similar balance is maintained in the NT, with some suffering and death being attributed to the specific sin of those concerned (Jn 5.14; Acts 5.1-11; 1 Cor 11.30; 1 Jn 5.16), while in other places such a direct connection is denied (Lk 13.1-5; Jn 9.2-3; 2 Cor 12.7; Gal 4.13-14).⁶

⁴ It should be acknowledged that my emphasis here of answering the question of what it must have been like to witness the "unroofing" is not at all Mark's interest. He is more concerned with the identity of Jesus and his mission.

⁵ France, 125.

⁶ Ibid, 124-125.

Of interest in the passages cited by France is Psalm 41:

- ¹ Blessed are those who have regard for the weak;
Yahweh delivers them in times of trouble.
- ² Yahweh protects and preserves them—
they are counted among the blessed in the land—
he does not give them over to the desire of their foes.
- ³ Yahweh sustains them on their sickbed
and restores them from their bed of illness.
- ⁴ I said, "Have mercy on me, Yahweh;
heal me, for I have sinned against you."
- ⁵ My enemies say of me in malice,
"When will he die and his name perish?"
- ⁶ Whenever they come to see me,
they speak falsely, while their hearts gather slander;
then they go out and spread it abroad.
- ⁷ All my enemies whisper together against me;
they imagine the worst for me, saying,
- ⁸ "A vile disease has beset him;
he will never get up from the place where he lies."

It is verse 4 that is most revealing: "Have mercy on me, Yahweh, heal me, for I have sinned against you." David seeks Yahweh to heal him for his sins. In this passage, it is clear that there is a connection between sickness and sin.

Another passage of interest⁷ is Isaiah 38, which depicts Hezekiah's illness and restoration:

- ¹⁶ Lord, by such things people live;
and my spirit finds life in them too.
You restored me to health
and let me live.
- ¹⁷ Surely it was for my benefit
that I suffered such anguish.
In your love you kept me
from the pit of destruction;
you have put all my sins
behind your back.

Hezekiah received healing from his illness ("I will add fifteen years to your life") and interprets it as the forgiveness of sins ("you have put all my sins behind your back").

⁷ See also, Ps 103.3 (synonymous parallelism); Hos 14.4; Is 57.18-19.

Rabbinic tradition agrees with this interpretation. The Babylonian Talmud *Nedarim* states that “a sick person does not arise from his sickness until all his sins are forgiven him” (41a). It is clear that in Jewish thought there was a connection between sin and sickness, so it is not out of the ordinary for Jesus to think the same.⁸

As France has pointed out in the passage above, there is a balance to be sought after in one’s view of the correlation between sin and sickness. Marcus opines correctly that John 9 gives the best commentary.

Perhaps the best commentary on the issue is provided by John 9.2-3, where Jesus shifts his disciples’ attention away from their cruel preoccupation with the blind man’s presumed responsibility for his affliction and redirects it to the witness that his cure will bear to the advent of God’s eschatological grace: ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him’ (RSV).⁹

The claim of forgiveness by Jesus initiated the scribes’ διαλογιζομενοι εν ταις καρδιαις αυτων (lit. “dialoguing in their hearts”). The scribes were in a serious struggle over Jesus’ words. The question is raised in their hearts, “Why does he speak like that?” And the charge of blasphemy is considered – “Who is able to forgive sins except the One God?”¹⁰ We, as post-Easter Christians, are quick to judge the scribes as stupid or incompetent, but the reverse is true. The scribes are asking the right question, but have, like everyone else, misunderstood the identity of Jesus. Exodus 34.7 says that it is Yahweh who “forgives wickedness, rebellion, and sin.” In Isaiah 43.25, Yahweh claims, “‘I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.’” The radical monotheism of Judaism had no room for a man who had divine powers that belonged only to Yahweh. As modern Rabbi Shmuley Boteach has said, “It is absolute sacrilege in Judaism to believe that any human being is a deity.”¹¹

The matter is complicated more by the fact that in no text, with the exception of one controversial passage in a Qumran fragment (*Prayer of Nabonidus*)¹², does a human

⁸ Witherington (118) makes an interesting note: “The story could be said as well to be an example of how Jesus took a holistic approach to healing – the whole person must be ministered to for it to be truly well.”

⁹ Marcus, 221.

¹⁰ This combination of words echoes the Jewish Shema, “The Yahweh our God is one,” Deut 6.4.

¹¹ Quoted from episode of *Faith Under Fire* at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jno5b0tQ5Ck> accessed January 3, 2009.

¹² Complete text is as follows:

Words of the prayer, said by Nabonidus, king of Babylonia, the great king, when afflicted with an ulcer on command of the most high God in Temâ:

‘I, Nabonidus, was afflicted with an evil ulcer for seven years, and far from men I was driven, until I prayed to the most high God. And an exorcist pardoned my sins. He was a Jew from among the children of the exile of Judah, and said: “Recount this in writing to glorify and exalt the name of the most high God.” Then I wrote this: “When I was afflicted for seven years by the most high

being have the authority to forgive sins. The Messiah is never credited with the ability to forgive sins, though there is some evidence of him doing so as God's agent,¹³ which may give some background to the passage. One of interest is the Testament of Levi 18:

And after their punishment shall have come from the Lord, then will the Lord raise up to the priesthood a new Priest, to whom all the words of the Lord shall be revealed; and He shall execute a judgment of truth upon the earth, in the fullness of days. And His star shall arise in heaven, as a king shedding forth the light of knowledge in the sunshine of day, and He shall be magnified in the world until His ascension. He shall shine forth as the sun in the earth, and shall drive away all darkness from the world under heaven, and there shall be peace in all the earth. The heavens shall rejoice in His days, and the earth shall be glad, and the clouds shall be joyful, and the knowledge of the Lord shall be poured forth upon the earth, as the water of seas; and the angels of the glory of the presence of the Lord shall be glad in Him. The heavens shall be opened, and from the temple of glory shall the sanctification come upon Him with the Father's voice, as from Abraham the father of Isaac. And the glory of the Most High shall be uttered over Him, and the spirit of understanding and of sanctification shall rest upon Him in the water. He shall give the majesty of the Lord to His sons in truth for evermore; and there shall none succeed Him for all generations, even for ever. *And in His priesthood shall all sin come to an end, and the lawless shall rest from evil, and the just shall rest in Him.* And He shall open the gates of paradise, and shall remove the threatening sword against Adam; and He shall give to His saints to eat from the tree of life, and the spirit of holiness shall be on them. And Beliar shall be bound by Him, and He shall give power to His children to tread upon the evil spirits. And the Lord shall rejoice in His children, and the Lord shall be well pleased in His beloved for ever. Then shall Abraham and Isaac and Jacob be joyful, and I will be glad, and all the saints shall put on gladness.

Some have interpreted this preChristian writing in a way that makes Messiah a forgiver of sins as the mediator for Yahweh (priestly duty), though it is still heavily debated.

Jesus now does something else that only Yahweh does, judge the secrets of the heart. It is apparent that he is more than a man. A key text on this attribute of Yahweh is Ps 139. In this Psalm, David is depicting the omniscience and omnipresence of Yahweh. David knows that Yahweh alone can know him. This knowledge prompts David to ask him to "Search me, O God, and know my heart" (23). A similar concept is in Prov 24:

- ¹¹ Rescue those being led away to death;
hold back those staggering toward slaughter.
¹² If you say, "But we knew nothing about this,"
does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?
Does not he who guards your life know it?
Will he not repay everyone according to what they have done?

God with an evil ulcer during my stay at Temâ, I prayed to the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood, stone and lime, because I thought and considered them gods..." *[the end is missing]*
¹³ "Koch claims that the Messiah is a forgiver of sins in *Tg. Isa* 53.4 and that the eschatological high priest is one in *T. Levi* 18.9, but these figures only make intercession for sinners or announce God's forgiveness to them; God himself remains the actual agent of forgiveness" (Marcus, 217).

Jesus is doing things that only Yahweh does. This is due to Mark's high Christology. He is the one with the ἐξουσία to overpower demonic forces and heal all diseases and now to forgive sins and know the secrets of the heart. He is the God-man.

One more poignant nuance in the forgiving of sins is that it is a key characteristic in the Isaianic New Exodus theme Mark is following. In Isaiah 43, an important passage for the New Exodus imagery, Yahweh says, "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more" (25). This is in the context of strong exodus imagery:

- ¹⁵ I am the LORD, your Holy One,
Israel's Creator, your King."
¹⁶ This is what the LORD says—
he who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters,
¹⁷ who drew out the chariots and horses,
the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:
¹⁸ "Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.
²⁰ The wild animals honor me,
the jackals and the owls,
because I provide water in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland,
to give drink to my people, my chosen,
²¹ the people I formed for myself
that they may proclaim my praise.

With the imagery we see that the forgiveness of sins is an eschatological event occurring at the Second Exodus.

The question Jesus asks is poignant: "Which is easier?" Joel Marcus challenges us to take the question seriously:

But which *is* easier? From the standpoint of systematic theology, it may be simpler to perform a miraculous cure than to forgive a person's sins, but in terms of external proof, which is what is at stake in our passage, it is easier to declare sins forgiven than to declare a person cured. One may say, "Your sins are forgiven," but are they? Outside observers have no immediate way of knowing,

whereas they can at once verify a miraculous cure. Thus Jesus' ability to heal is an argument "from the greater to the lesser": if he can do a hard thing such as healing a paralytic, he can certainly do the "easier" thing of forgiving his sins. The miracle thus confirms the claim to forgive sins, although the logic is, from the systematic point of view, flawed.¹⁴

The phrase "so that you may know that the Son of Man has the authority to forgive sins on the earth" is highly debated. The question is who is saying this? Is it Jesus or Mark? Witherington goes the way of a Markan parenthetical:

The considerable awkwardness of the grammar at this point suggests that we should take seriously the likelihood that we have a parenthesis inserted by Mark here and directed to his own audience...it seems likely that we have a transition to an editorial comment here where the author addresses the audience as "you." Parenthetical remarks are not uncommon in Mark (cf. 2.15, 28; 7.3-4, 19; 13.14). The Evangelist in fact had no choice, if he wanted to make an explanatory remark to his own audience, but to put it in the text, since there were no footnotes. This means we should likely see v. 10a as Mark's own comment and not as a saying of Jesus, which makes it an unusual statement, for the title Son of man is usually recognized as something the early church, especially a church largely populated by gentiles, did not use to speak of Jesus (cf. the phrase's total absence in Paul's letters).¹⁵

Witherington has a solid argument, but it must be rejected. The grammar is awkward, but Mark's grammar is awkward in other places (cf. "Simon and Andrew, Simon's brother," 1.16; n. 2). Also, his last point, namely that the early Christians did not refer to Jesus as the Son of Man, is a good argument against his position, whereas Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man 14 times in Mark's gospel.

The idea of "the Son of Man" is one of the most hotly debated topics in NT studies.¹⁶ The title υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου (son of man) in the earlier texts of the Hebrew Bible was a synonym for "human being."¹⁷ This is the emphasis in Ezekiel, where he is called "son of man" over 90 times; the title contrasts the lowly human nature of the prophet compared to the divine nature of the oracles. In later Hebrew texts, specifically Daniel and 1 Enoch, the Son of Man was given much more theological weight. Daniel 7 is the most important text for our passage:

¹³ "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and

¹⁴ Marcus, 217-218.

¹⁵ Witherington, 116-117.

¹⁶ Because of space we do not have the liberty to discuss the complexities of the debate, but will present the main idea.

¹⁷ Notice the synonymous parallelism in Ps 8.4.

was led into his presence. ¹⁴He was given rule, glory, and a kingdom; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His authority is an everlasting authority that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

The “Son of Man” (υιος ανθρωπου) is invited into the presence of Yahweh and given three things: rule (αρχη), glory (τιμη), and a kingdom (βασιλευα), presumably the Kingdom of God, which is the content of Jesus’ preaching in 1.14-15. In those verses, Jesus was shown as bringing the kingdom of God with him in his ministry. (The phrase, “all nations and peoples of every tongue worshiped him” is similar to Paul’s phrase in Phil 2: “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father,” further evidencing the early Christian interpretation of Dan 7.) The next line is crucial for our passage. The issue here is εξουσια, Jesus’ authority. Jesus’ claim to be the Son of Man is a claim to divine authority, which apparently involves the forgiveness of sins and is a manifestation of the power and incorruptibility of the kingdom. Yahweh, “at the climax of history has delegated his power of absolution to a ‘Son of Man’ who carries out his gracious will in the earthly sphere; therefore, *‘upon the earth* the Son of Man has the authority to forgive sins.’”¹⁸ Authority is the reason why Jesus can execute the holistic healing of the paralytic. Yahweh is the one forgiving through his authoritative delegate, Jesus. That the Son of Man forgives sins instead of judging sins is a Markan twist upon the Jewish expectation of the messianic Son of Man. In 1 Enoch he is presented as judge,¹⁹ not forgiver.

The command to the paralytic to “rise, take up your bed, and walk” is stated three times: once to the scribes, once to the man, and once describing the healed condition of the man. The first verb, εγειρω (to rise), is totally unnecessary for Mark to insert. The same idea is in the remainder of the command, “take up your bed and walk.” Mark inserts this for a reason; it is a clear allusion to the resurrection from the dead that is worked in Jesus by God at Easter. Although the scribes misunderstand Jesus’ identity, the hearers of the gospel in the Roman churches will note that this Jesus is the one who has paved the way for forgiven sinners to be raised in the same fashion as his resurrection. “The power by which Jesus heals the man is the same power by which God will raise Jesus himself from the dead.”²⁰

As with the leper, the healing was instantaneous. Whatever the condition of the man, it would be an amazing sight to behold to see a lame man’s legs strengthen to the point that he could bend, take up his sleeping mat, and walk out of the house. But there is something more marvelous happening here. Isaiah 35 spells out the significant of Jesus healing a lame man:

¹⁸ Marcus, 223.

¹⁹ E.g., 45.3, “On that day My Elect One shall sit on the throne of glory and shall try their works...”

²⁰ Marcus, 223; the phrase “and he rose” is a divine passive, implying the power of God behind the act of rising.

- ¹ The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, ² it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the LORD,
the splendor of our God.
- ³ Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
- ⁴ say to those with fearful hearts,
"Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you."
- ⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
- ⁶ *Then will the lame leap like a deer,*
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
*Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.*
- ⁷ The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.
- ⁸ *And a highway will be there;*
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.
- ⁹ No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,
- ¹⁰ *and those the LORD has rescued will return.*
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

The signs of the New Exodus have emerged in this Jesus story.

This interpretation is confirmed by the reaction of the crowds (χωρῆν in v. 2). They were amazed (paralleled in 1.22, 27) and glorified God. The reaction is expected by the object of the praise is subtle. As Marcus points out (224), there is an ambiguity to whether Jesus or Yahweh accomplishes the actually healing and forgiving. This is purposeful in Mark's Christological framework. Whereas in a modern American context it would be more natural for the crowds to praise Jesus, it is clear that Mark wishes us to see the crowds as viewing Jesus' actions as inspired by Yahweh.

This interpretation fits nicely with the conclusion to Is 35, that the redeemed will enter Zion with exuberance. This is due to the fact that they "have never seen anything like this!" This is because Yahweh is doing a "new thing" (Is 43.19) in Jesus. He is bringing his people back to Zion, back to perfect communion with him.